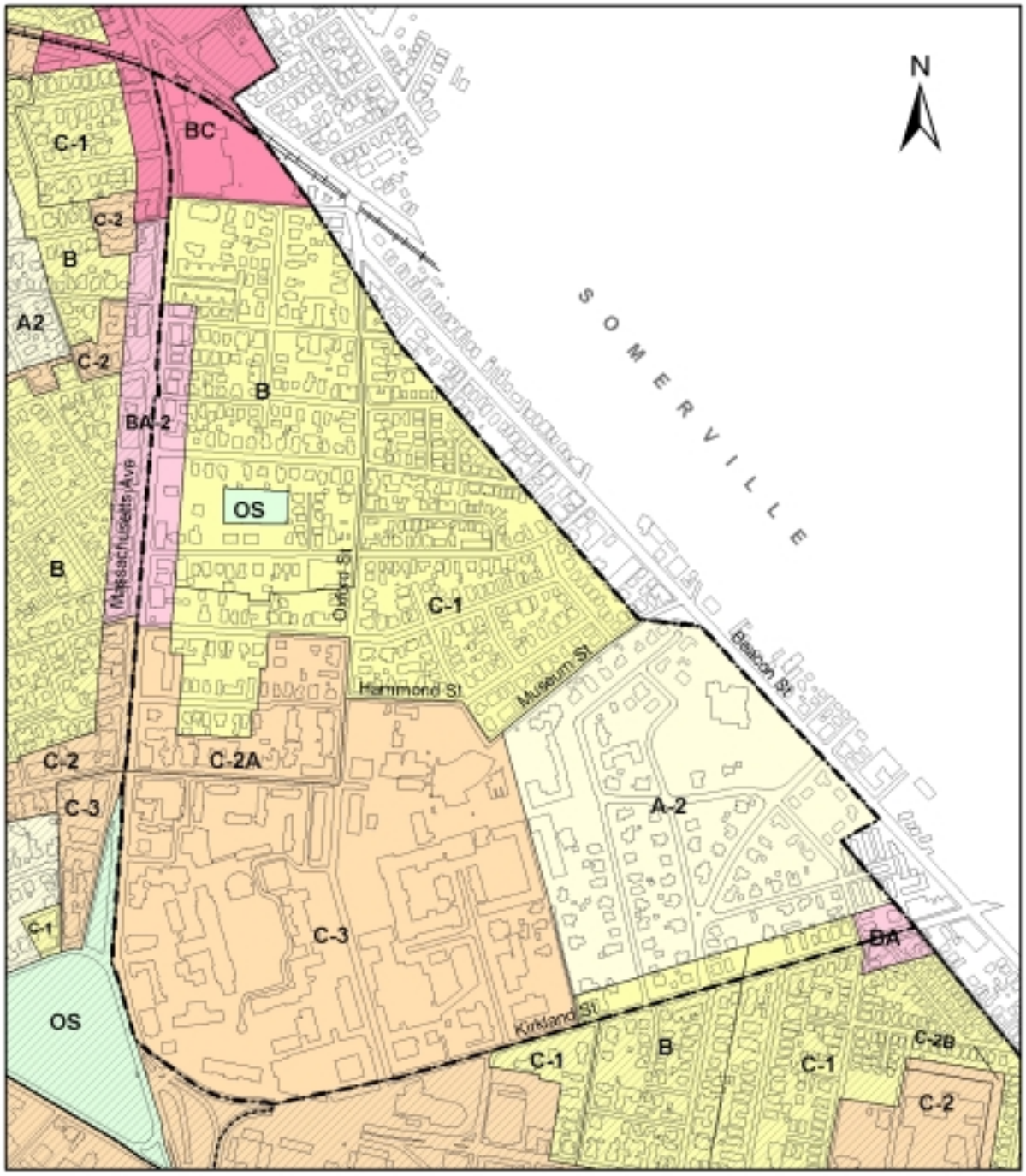
Agassiz Neighborhood Zoning Map



Land Use and Zoning

Communities employ a variety of techniques to regulate land use patterns, physical growth, and the built environment. The principal tool used by the City of Cambridge is zoning; in addition, some small pockets in the city are regulated by specific design and development standards. Cambridge is currently divided into approximately 51 zoning districts, which regulate land use, building setbacks, height, and density, the amount of open space on the parcel(s), parking quantity, and signage.

In the early 1960s, there was a large amount of development taking place in the Agassiz neighborhood. Zoning districts in the neighborhood at this time permitted higher densities including no restrictions on the heights of buildings. Much of the property owned by Harvard University had no height limit. Land in the Porter Square area was zoned Business B which allowed a 4.0 floor area ratio (FAR).

In the late 1970's, more restrictive zoning was adopted in Agassiz. During this time, 40-45% of the neighborhood was rezoned including Porter Square, which was rezoned to a 2.0 FAR with a 50-foot height limit. A subsequent rezoning in the 1980s lowered the residential density requirement from C-1 to Residence B with a 0.5 FAR and a 35-foot height limit. A city ordinance in 1995 (Ordinance 1170) also reduced the development allowed in the Residence B district.

Excluding open space, the Agassiz neighborhood has 7 zoning districts:

- Residence A-2: Single family dwellings with a 35-foot (3 residential story) height limit and 0.5 FAR.
- Residence B: Single and 2-family dwellings; townhouse dwellings with 35 foot height limit and 0.5 FAR for the first 5,000 square feet of a lot; 0.35 for any portion of the lot greater than 5,000 square feet.
- Residence C-1: Single and 2-family dwellings; townhouse dwellings; multi-family dwellings with a 35 foot height limit and 0.75 FAR.
- Residence C-2A: (At Lesley College Campus) Single and 2-family dwellings, townhouse dwellings, multifamily dwellings, institutional use, hotels. A 60 foot height limit and 2.5 FAR
- Residence C-3: (at Harvard University Campus) Single and 2-family dwellings, townhouse dwellings, multifamily dwellings, institutional use, hotels. 120-foot height limit (12 residential stories, 8 or 9 Research and Development stories) with a 3.0 FAR.
- Business A-2: (along Massachusetts Avenue) General office and retail uses, housing. 45-foot height limit with setbacks above 35 feet (3 office stories, 4 residential stories).
- Business C: (at Porter Square) General office and retail uses, housing. 55-foot height limit but 35 foot within 50 feet of residential districts with a 2.0 FAR.

Zoning in the Agassiz Neighborhood

Most of the Agassiz neighborhood is zoned residential, with the C-3 district allowing significantly higher densities as well as institutional uses. For this reason, transitional zoning between districts of contrasting allowed heights and densities has become an important issue in the

Agassiz neighborhood. In order to address these issues Harvard University recently completed a study process with Agassiz neighbors, which resulted in the rezoning of the Hammond Street and Gorham Street edges to provide a better physical transition with the neighborhood. The zoning change adopted by the City Council in Spring 2002 created a 100 foot transition overlay zone in which building heights were reduced (generally to 35 feet), minimum setbacks were increased, and breaks in building massing were required to create a more neighborhood "feel" at the edge.

The City of Cambridge adopted a Citywide Rezoning Ordinance on February 12, 2001, in order to address issues of: future density and traffic growth; the need for more housing, including affordable units; and better opportunities for public review of large projects. Significant changes to the Zoning Ordinance are outlined below:

- The addition of new residential districts (through rezoning of former commercial districts) in order to encourage new housing.
- Increased number of housing units allowed in certain areas to reflect existing conditions as well as help facilitate the conversion of industrial and commercial buildings to housing.
- Adjustment of allowed floor area ratios (FAR) to encourage housing over other uses.
- Reduced FARs for commercial, industrial, and non-residential districts.
- Inclusion of aboveground parking structures in FAR, to make it easier to reasonably anticipate the actual bulk of a building.
- Citywide project review process establishing traffic and urban design standards for development projects likely to have significant impact on abutting properties and the surrounding environment.
- Revised parking requirements for general office and research and development uses.

Land Use and Zoning Recommendations

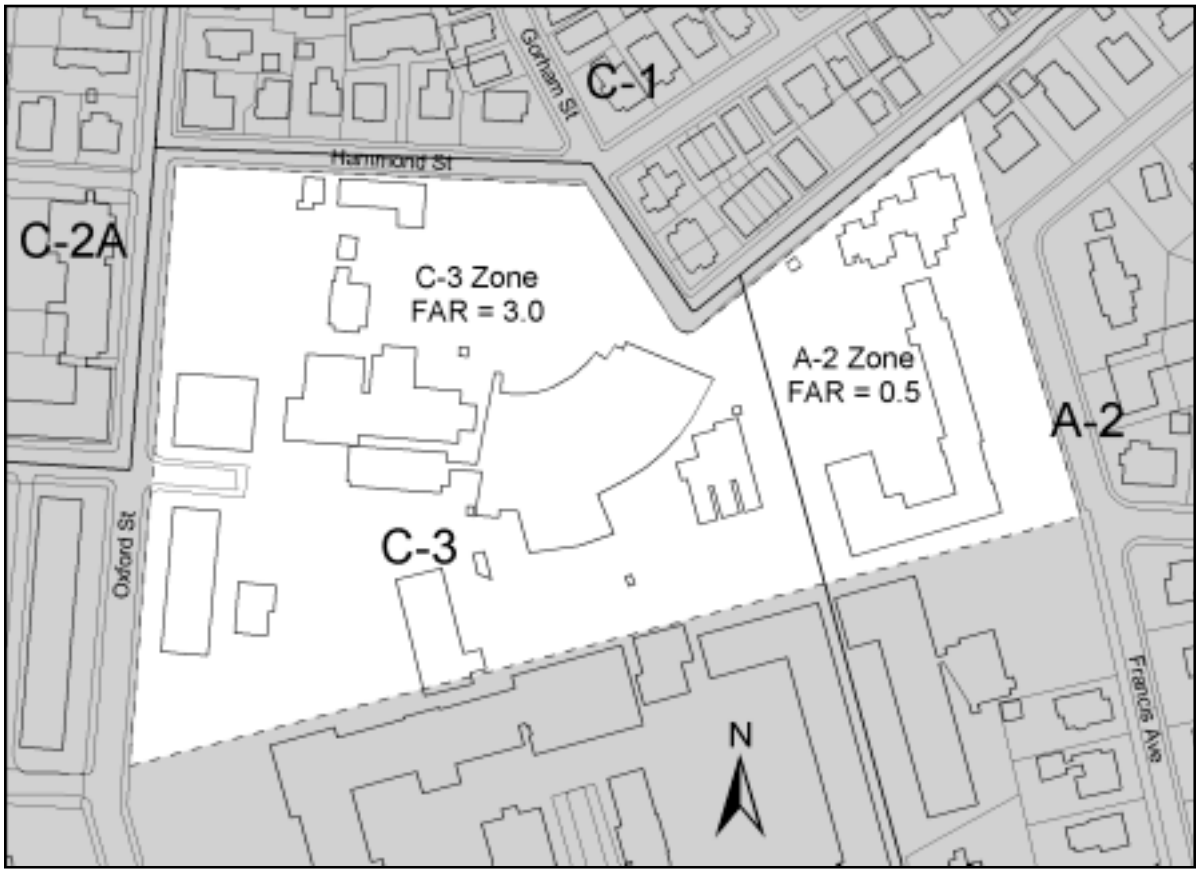
1. Harvard University should implement the recommendations of the Hammond/ Gorham edge committee, in order to create a more friendly campus edge with open quadrangles. (*See also Harvard University recommendations in the Institutions Section*)
2. The City's Community Development Department (CDD) should prepare an inventory of lots by size in the C-1 district showing the potential build out of lots over 6,000 square feet. This inventory should be presented to the Agassiz Neighborhood Council.
3. The Agassiz neighborhood should consider establishing a neighborhood conservation district.
4. A transition buffer zone should be created where the C2-A District abuts the C-1 District (where Lesley University abuts the neighborhood).

Urban Design

Many of the structures, streets, and districts in the Agassiz neighborhood have a very historic character and feel; therefore it is important for the neighborhood to plan for existing and anticipated development. Of particular concern in the Agassiz neighborhood are the protection of historically significant areas and buildings, adequate buffer zones between areas of different allowed densities, and enhancement of the existing streetscape through tree plantings, as well as pedestrian friendly street designs.

A large portion of the Agassiz neighborhood is comprised of the campuses of Harvard and Lesley Universities. As these institutions expand it will be important to ensure that adjacent areas of the neighborhood are not overwhelmed by new

Hammond and Gorham Streets in Agassiz



buildings and structures associated with the schools. An important area in the Agassiz neighborhood where the potential for high-density development next to much smaller structures exists is in the vicinity of Hammond and Gorham Streets. The campus of Harvard University in this area is zoned C-3 residential (120 foot height limit) while parcels across the street are zoned C-1 (35 foot height limit) and typified by a mix of 2 and 3-family wood frame structures.

Harvard University recently completed a study process with Agassiz neighbors, which resulted in the rezoning of the Hammond Street and Gorham Street edges (see map above) to provide a better physical transition with the neighborhood. The zoning change adopted by the City Council in Spring 2002 created a 100 foot transition overlay zone in which building heights were reduced (generally to 35 feet), minimum setbacks were increased, and breaks in building massing were required to create a more neighborhood "feel" at the edge.

The City's growth policy document, Towards a Sustainable Future, created in 1993, attempts to address similar issues.

Growth Policy #61 states that urban design standards should reflect the historic context in which change will occur while permitting design that is responsive to contemporary circumstances. For a neighborhood like Agassiz, which has a strong historic pattern, this is something that needs to be considered.

Growth Policy #62 describes the need to make better transitions across streets or property line to property line where there is a very high-density district next to a very low district.

During the study process the Agassiz Neighborhood Study Committee identified important urban design features present in the neighborhood. Features include transportation corridors, special points or nodes, landmarks, and neighborhood edges. These features are an important part of neighborhood identity and attractiveness. In the Agassiz neighborhood these features should be enhanced or protected as in the case of certain historically significant landmarks. Where feasible, the urban design recommendations developed by the Study Committee should be applied to the specific features listed by the Study Committee. The features identified by the Study Committee in Agassiz include:

Transportation Corridors:

- Parking lots on Oxford Street
- Academy of Arts and Sciences
- Massachusetts Avenue to Oxford Street
- Lesley University Campus
- Behind Perkins Street on Harvard University campus to behind 29 Everett Street
- Parking lot of 28 Wendell Street to Massachusetts Avenue
- Star Market to Porter Square
- Somerville Avenue to Oxford Street and Massachusetts Avenue

Landmarks:

- Starbucks
- The Porter Exchange Building
- Palfrey House
- Baldwin School (formerly Agassiz School)

Nodes:

- Baldwin School
- Sacramento field
- Star Market

Neighborhood edges:

- Hammond Street
- Gorham Street
- Museum Street

Urban Design Recommendations

1. New buildings should be harmonious with existing neighborhood residential aesthetics.
2. Pedestrian rights-of-way in the neighborhood should be preserved and maintained. Example: Francis Avenue to Museum Street.
3. Utility companies should be encouraged to place utilities underground whenever feasible.
4. The City should plant and maintain street trees.

Transportation

BACKGROUND

Increasingly, the impact of automobile traffic has become a pivotal planning issue, particularly in dense city neighborhoods such as Agassiz. Traffic volumes, parking availability, and travel mode of choice all affect the quality of life in the city. The key challenge is to enhance mobility while at the same time limiting the reliance on automobiles and their negative effect on quality of life in Cambridge. How can mobility needs be met without diminishing the essential qualities of Cambridge and its neighborhoods?

Auto traffic continues to increase, both from regional commuters traveling through Cambridge and from greater auto use within the city by both residents and employers. In the past two decades, Cambridge has become a regional employment center. Whereas in 1970 residents of Cambridge or abutting towns filled over 70% of local jobs, by 2000 that figure had fallen to 46%. More Cambridge residents, in turn, commute greater distances to jobs outside Cambridge.

It should also be noted that work trips are only 20% of all trips. According to the U.S. Census, the proportion of Cambridge employees driving alone– who may live in Cambridge or elsewhere—increased, from 43% in 1980 to 52% in 1990, while the percentage using car or van pools or transit declined. Meanwhile, Cambridge residents—who may work here or elsewhere—are more likely to use single occupancy vehicles: their number grew from 32% to 37% of the resident labor force between 1980 and 1990 and down to 35% in 2000.

Citywide Efforts to Address Parking, Traffic, and Transportation Concerns

The City of Cambridge has tried to be proactive in addressing transportation through its planning efforts. The City's Growth Policy Document assumes that any improvements to the roadway network should be aimed at redirecting traffic away from and reducing traffic speed on neighborhood streets. The City's Vehicle Trip Reduction Ordinance also directs the City to reduce the number of single occupant vehicle trips, expand non-automobile forms of transportation, and encourage new development near public transit nodes.

In November 1998, the City passed the Parking and Transportation Demand Management Ordinance (PTDM), which requires non-residential development that seeks to build parking to commit to a maximum percentage of employees, customers, and visitors that will arrive via single occupant vehicle. Developers must have plans for meeting these aggressive targets prior to obtaining a building permit and are required to monitor and report their performance annually. These plans are helping to reverse commuting trends in Cambridge by providing options to employees and customers and holding property owners responsible for the success of these measures.

One of the emerging processes that will affect not only transportation, but also buildings, land use, and waste management in the city is the Climate Protection Plan. This plan was adopted in December 2002 by the City Council. The plan

maps out options and a process to reduce Cambridge's contribution of greenhouse gases that cause climate change, or global warming. The City Council adopted a target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent below 1990 levels by the year 2010. In order to reach this target, various actions will be required that make our buildings and transportation more energy efficient, increase the use of renewable energy such as solar, encourage non-automobile modes of transportation, increase tree canopy cover, and reducing waste generation. In addition to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, these actions will also reduce conventional air pollution, reduce stormwater runoff, and improve the livability of the community.

One way of reducing reliance on automobiles is to make alternative forms of transportation safer, more accessible, and more enjoyable. Such is the goal of the City's ongoing Pedestrian and Bicycle Committees, which address a wide variety of projects and policies affecting those using Cambridge city streets.

Major Transportation Issues in Agassiz

Like many urban neighborhoods, Agassiz faces both negative and positive consequences in terms of transportation because of its location. Harvard and Lesley University draw commuters to the area, many of whom drive to get to work or class. These individuals can create increased through traffic on neighborhood streets, and can lead to non-residents parking on neighborhood streets. This pressure continues into the evening, as both Porter and Harvard Squares contain popular shops, restaurants, and bars.

However, Agassiz's location between Porter Square and Harvard Square gives it the advantage of a diversity of transit options. Both places have Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Red Line subway stops, as well as many bus stops. Porter also has commuter line access. This rich transportation network gives residents access to a variety of transportation choices, while helping to encourage alternatives to single occupancy vehicle use within the City. Significant planning projects are underway to improve both Harvard and Porter Square (described under "Completed and Ongoing Transportation Actions in Agassiz").

Completed and Ongoing Transportation Actions in Agassiz

During recent years, the City conducted major stormwater/ sewer separation work in Agassiz. While this construction project temporarily disrupted life in the neighborhood, it also provided a unique opportunity for roadway improvements. The majority of these improvements took place in the residential area east of Oxford Street. After receiving feedback at two meetings with the Agassiz Neighborhood Council, the City decided upon and completed the following actions:

- Repaved streets;
- Installed handicapped ramps;
- Improved crosswalk markings;
- Installed all-way stops;
- Added a contra-flow bicycle lane on Scott Street;
- Added a sidewalk on one side of Scott Street; and,
- Constructed curb extensions at the intersection of Scott and Beacon Street, as well as the intersection of Scott, Bryant, and Holden Street;

Additionally, smaller scale improvements have been completed at the request of residents. The City has:

- Moved the loading zone on North Oxford Street away from the intersection and closer to the retail establishment it serves;
- Installed playground warning signs at Sacramento Field; and,
- Replaced Resident Permit Parking and Street Cleaning signs throughout the neighborhood.

The City is also continuing to work with Harvard University to re-align the path through the Divinity School parking lot to better align with the intersection of Gorham and Museum Streets.

In April 2002, a committee of residents and business owners began meeting to discuss the Harvard Square Redesign Process. This Committee is charged with evaluating improvements for pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists. This includes a comprehensive evaluation of traffic, lighting, landscaping, signage, and plazas. The resulting improvements stand to benefit Agassiz by enhancing transportation and pedestrian experience at one of its major transit hubs.

A similar effort has begun in Porter Square. Funds were set-aside in the FY03 budget to complete design plans for the reconstruction of Porter Square. The City has re-convened a citizen advisory committee that last met in 1998 to meet over the next six months to consider final design details. The new design will focus on improving pedestrian and bicycle safety in the square, while also creating a new left turn from the Porter Square Shopping Center to Massachusetts Avenue southbound. The project also includes new sidewalks, a new plaza, landscaping and street furniture in many places. Construction is scheduled to begin in the summer of 2003, along with sewer separation work.

Study Committee Transportation Discussion

An area of primary concern among Committee members is the experience of pedestrians. The neighborhood has many pedestrians, both residents and visitors. Pedestrians enjoy the varied complex of streets, the permeable campuses, the various commercial activities situated on larger streets, and the ability to walk to Harvard and Porter Squares in minutes. The Committee believes these attributes of the neighborhood must be preserved and strengthened. Pedestrian activity fosters the interaction between neighbors, makes the neighborhood safer, is good for health and environment, yet has only a light impact on physical infrastructure. The Committee encourages actions that improve the pedestrian experience, especially pedestrian safety. The committee's pedestrian recommendations (some detailed in other sections) include aspects of traffic calming (see Transportation), permeability of university campuses (see Institutions), care and maintenance of sidewalks, and preservation of alternative paths (see Open Space).

The Committee encourages property owners, residents, university maintenance, and the City's Department of PublicWorks to care for and maintain sidewalks. These are citywide concerns as well as Agassiz neighborhood concerns. Sidewalks should be safe and inviting to all pedestrians, including parents pushing a stroller, an individual in a wheelchair, persons with impaired vision, and all others. To achieve these goals, sidewalks should be level, of sufficient width, in good repair, and unobstructed. The Committee recommends that the pothole hotline be extended to include unsafe sidewalk conditions. Obstructions include snow and ice, vegetation, and personal belongings.

Intersection of Cambridge and Quincy Streets, looking toward Agassiz

Transportation Recommendations

The Committee recommends that the City or the MBTA undertake the following actions to improve transportation in the Agassiz neighborhood. Any progress made to date on these recommendations is noted in *italicized* text.

Transportation Recommendations

1. Encourage non-automobile travel.
2. Encourage Harvard and Lesley Universities to implement intra-city transportation options for their communities.
3. Encourage the MBTA to institute a bus route from Porter Square to Kendall Square along Beacon St and Hampshire St. Although this is a natural transportation corridor, no public transport goes along the length of this route.
4. Support efforts to promote system-wide improvements in MBTA bus service. Example: Harvard Square to Coolidge Corner.
5. Encourage alternative fuel transportation.
6. Support efforts to implement urban ring transit system.
7. Implement traffic calming as neighborhood streets are resurfaced.
8. Promote safer pedestrian crossings at:
    a. Massachusetts Avenue at Garfield Street. *The Traffic Department has installed "Yield to Pedestrian" signs and has upgraded the crosswalk to a 24-inch wide international/ zebra, Thermoplastic-type. This location will be examined as a potential location for curb extensions during future roadway construction activity in this area.*
    b. Oxford Street at Kirkland Street. The Committee supports Harvard's relocation of the shuttle stop to the Memorial Hall circular driveway.
    c. The exit to the Science Center on Oxford Street. *Long-term plans for traffic calming include crosswalk improvements in this location.*
    d. Kirkland Street at Irving Street. The existing crosswalk does not correspond to the one at Cambridge Street and Irving Street, disrupting a logical pedestrian route. Crosswalks should be on both sides of the street.
    e. Kirkland Street at Holden Street. At present there is only a crosswalk on the west side of the street, not the east side. Crosswalks should be on both sides of the street.
    f. The end of Holden Street to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences park entrances. *During a previous traffic calming project in this area, neighborhood residents determined that a crosswalk would not be appropriate at this location. However, the City will continue to evaluate methods for improving safety at this intersection.*
9. Make resident only parking at night on Oxford Street from Everett to Wendell.
10. Provide Zipcar spaces in Harvard and/ or Lesley parking lots.